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ABSTRACT

This speech explores, in part, the literature concerning single parent families and the results of some of the research on such families. It suggests some possible implications for social planning and policy in response to the existence of these families. The single parent system represented in the person of the single parent mother has many of the same social and psychological characteristics of two-parent families. Among these, the most common seems to focus on financial stress, emotional stress caused by role conflict, and problems caused by public opinion and attitudes. Virtually no literature was found in the general area of the single parent father. Based on a recent research study of 100 single parents, it was found that even in the most adaptive situations there may still exist within the parent subtle feelings of guilt, rejection, and stress which may be communicated, no matter how subtly, to the child. The author suggests change in social policy which should include improvements in child care, work structure, research projects on the single parent, legislation, and crisis intervention. (Author/PC)

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THE SINGLE PARENT FAMILY: SOME SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS AND THEIR IMPLICATION FOR SOCIAL POLICY DECISIONS

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In the past decade, increasingly more attention has been directed toward the question of single parent families and the problems of such families. Owing to a number of phenomena, the increase in single parent families has become a social force of no mean proportion. Census estimates of roughly 8 million such family units.[1] Given this relatively large segment of our population, it is becoming more and more critical that we as a society seriously entertain the question of addressing our resources both in research and development to the issue of single parent families.

At this point in time, the overwhelming percentage of research done on the family has been directed toward the traditional two parent family. Of this body of literature, much of the work has been directed toward the development of the child and from this the inferences relative to parent behavior have been gleaned.

While it is not my intention to argue the relative merits of such study, it is, nevertheless, my intention to situate the need for further study of single parent families and the need for more serious consideration of such studies that have been done in relation to social policy in our country. Obviously, the single parent family falls into two discreet groups: mother raising children alone and father raising children alone.

Of these sub-groups, the best information to date is in relation to mothers raising children alone. Very little has been done by way of research in the area of father raising children alone. It is also of some import to recognize that within these

two broad groups there exists the sub-groups which pose separate questions in themselves, namely single parents resulting from 1) divorce, 2) separation, 3) death, 4) by choice and 5) desertion.

It is the intention of this paper to explore in part the literature concerning the area of single parent families, the result of some of the research on such families, and finally to suggest some possible implication for social planning and policy in response to the existence of these families.

Single Parent Mother

The first and larger of the two groups which we will consider is the single parent family with the mother as the head of the household.

As of 1960, about one household out of ten in the United States way headed by a woman.[2] In an effort to situate the social and psychological characteristics of such mothers, I will proceed to identify the generic pattern and problems shared by all these mothers, and then look at the relatively unique patterns that cluster about any specific position.

The generic features of mother without partners are: 1) poverty, 2) role conflicts, 3) role shifts, 4) public attitudes, and 5) emotional deprivation.

1) Poverty: It is roughly estimated that households headed by women comprise only about 10 percent of all U.S. households, they constitute about 25 percent of the families in the so-called poverty group in American society.[3] In a study reported by Wm. Goode in 1956, he reported that a major complaint of divorced women was that

of financial stress.[4] In a report of the Bureau of Labor Statistics in 1971, it was reported that the average media income of female headed households was approximately $4,420.[5] In 1969, it was estimated that approximately 10.5 million children were living in poverty families.[6] Assuming the relative accuracy of Schour study in 1966, it is plausible to predict that approximately 3 million children are growing up in 6 million families in poverty situations.

2) Role Conflicts: The addition of the father role to the parental responsiblities of the single mother tends to produce conflict for the mother in fulfilling various roles with regard to time necessary for such roles, and the availability of personal resources to provide the role function. In the first case, it must be recognized that time for the single mother often becomes critical in that many more responsibilities are undertaken by a single parent when the partner is absent; and in the second instance the parent attempting to redefine their role vis-a-vis the new situation of a lack of a partner may be a consuming process psychologically.

3) Role Shifts: One particular difficulty encountered by the single parent mother is the problem of role shifts. Estimating that about 80 percent of the single mothers remarry, and that this group will have for some period of time assumed the roles of both parents, there is posed a problem in which the mother will be faced with relinguishing many of the father roles. In a study by Hill reported in 1949,[7] he identified two problems of single parent mothers: 1) some mothers could not accept the responsibility of the father role when the father left the home, and 2) that some mothers could not relinquish the father role upon the reintroduction of the

male presence in the home.

4) Public Attitude: In work done by Clinard in 1968[8] he identified a particular problem of single parent mothers as being that of "social deviation." In that single parent families tend to be viewed as socially deviant family situation by the community, there also appears to be the tendency on the part of the community to regard the parent and children as deviants. With the noted exception of the widow, all of the single mother situation in greater or lesser terms tend to be viewed as not "quite right."[9]

5) Emotional Deprivation: Any parent attempting to raise a child alone will suffer some degree of emotional deprivation. Essentially, the single parent is faced with all of the stresses of child rearing and few, if any, of the rewards of a love partner to support and share this burden. This state is typically reflective of an interim state for most mothers in that most will reach out for a new partner at some level of relationship.

At this point we have viewed some of the generic problems faced by the single parent mother as a particular family system.

In the more particular instance which we shall cover in this section, it should be observed that the single parent mother as a family system is faced with more specific forms of social and psychological pressure depending upon which sub-category the family falls into.

1) Divorce: There are some advantages which the divorced mother typically points toward which make her distinct from other single parent mothers. The first advantage, and perhaps the biggest

advantage is that of having the legal arrangements relative to finances and custody clearly spelled out by a court system. The single parent mother resulting from divorce has the further advantage of the clear legal status to associate with other men and remarry if she so chooses. A further advantage is that found by Goode[10] and one which is common to all single parents, namely, the fact that the parent does not have to share the parental decision making responsibilities with the other parent. While this is generally recognized as an advantage there is also encumbent upon such responsibility the proportionate weight of not having another adult to aid in the decision making process.

The disadvantages of the divorced single parent mother are also worthy of consideration at this point. First among there being the problem of role conflict and role shift often encountered subsequent to the divorce. Suddenly, the mother is faced with the responsibility of both parental roles and shifting, at least psychologically, necessary for carrying out both roles. In the second instance, the problem of finances, even in the face of court decision is typically encountered in as much as late or insufficient alimony payment is a relatively common occurrence. The third distinct disadvantage is the social stigma often attached to divorce, although this is becomming less the case each year as divorce becomes a more accepted commodity.

Finally, the single parent mother is faced with the problems of rebuilding a social life with the disadvantage of having to maintain a normal home life pattern for her children.

2) Desertion: Perhaps the most traumatic instance of the

single parent mother is that imposed by the situation of desertion. Desertion is more apt to be unilateral, therefore planning for provisions and resources does not take place, and there is no legal interaction which leaves the questions of finality in terms of a relationship up in the air and consequently the woman is not leaglly free to find another partner. Probably the deserted mother faces the largest disadvangages in the area of finances in that no planning ~~her~~ has typically taken place and in the area of role shifts and conflicts, again for the simple reason of lack of preparation. Psychologically and sociologically, the process of desertion is more messy, and often a more complex question than that of divorce for at least the two single reasons owing to lack of planning or preparation and the unilateral nature of the desertion process.[11] One advantage, if indeed it is thought to be an advantage, is found in the fact that the community sympathy, i.e., public opinion will run in favor of the woman. Hidden in this phenomenon though, is the problem of legal status which dictates the woman may not in fact remarry and consequently she is often left to seek companionship in ways which will not be observable in the community.

3) Separation: The separated single parent mother is faced with a situation somewhat better than that of the deserted mother. In all likelihood, the separation is by mutual agreement and financial arrangements have been agreed to as well as some understandings relative to the status of the relationship. Typically, the separated mother exhibits patterns quite similar to those of the divorced mother with the single exception that she is not free to remarry.[12]

4) Widowed Mother: The widowed mother has the single advantage in most instances of having public sympathy on her side. The obvious disadvantages are found in the trauma around the unexpected loss of a partner, the probable financial stress occurring from such a loss and the burdensome difficulties of having to assume roles which were not expected.

5) Unmarried Mother: The single parent mother who has received the greatest bulk of literature is undoubtably the case of the unmarried mother.[13] In sum, it may simply be stated that this woman faces all of the social and psychological problems faced by the four other types of single parent mothers. To their problems the additional problem of public attitudes which tend to stereotype many of these mothers[14] is also of central import. The unmarried mother is further disadvantaged insofar as she typically comes from non-white background and a lower socioeconomic class. The unmarried mother faces particular difficulty in adjusting to the responsibility of a child especially in the face of the father withdrawal or refusal to deal with the problem and her concern for the welfare of the child.[15]

In summary, it may be said that the single parent system represented in the person of the single parent mother has many of the same social and psychological characteristics. Among these the most common characteristic seems to gravitate around financial stress, emotional stress caused by role conflict, and the problem of public opinion and attitudes.

Single Parent Father

As of 1973, there were approximately 1¼ million families in which fathers were raising children alone.[16] As with the case of single parent mother families, we may divide the father only families into sub-groups of divorced, deserted, separated, and widowed. In reference to the social and psychological characteristics of this group we may also employ the same broad categories although recognizing some rather sharp differences. Typically, the father experiences similar emotional stress over the absence, for whatever causes, of the mother figure. The financial stresses, while present, are almost always less severe than those experienced by the single parent mother. The role conflict and role shift problems outlined earlier tend to be quite similar to those felt by the single parent mother.[17] With regard to public opinion, the single parent father typically encounter more sympathy and a status of tragic hero with regard to his plight since the society has stereotyped child rearing aa a largely maternal activity.[18]

The general area of single parent father is almost totally devoid of literature and to this author's knowledge, there exists no studies to date on single parent father.

Essentially, it is necessary at this point to infer the probabilities and problems of the single parent father from those studies conducted on the single parent mother.[19] In general, it is probably relatively accurate to surmise that the problems each experiences are not all that dissimilar, although some research in the area would most certainly be useful.

Health of the Single Parent Family System

Essentially, the question of healthy, i.e., psychological and/or social health, relative to the single parent family system is a twofold question. In the first instance, one may ask if the single parent family situation is a healthy place for the child or children. On the other hand, it would seem incumbent upon us to ask if the single parent family system is healthy for the parent. While it would appear foolish upon first glance to conclude that it would be possible that the relative health of either of these two groups in a family setting would be mutually exclusive, simply for reasons of interaction above, there exists the possibility that there is less danger of unhealthiness on the part of one or the other agents in a single parent family.

In relation to the child in the single parent family, it may be noted that a review of studies questioning the assumption that two parents are better than one has indicated that there exists little of no evidence to claim that such is the case.[20] The same question when viewed from the point of view of the parent has been investigated as recently as 1968 by Alfred Kadushin who summarizes his findings in the following statement, "The association between single parent familyhood and psychosocial pathology is neither strong nor invariable."[21] The question when taken together, i.e., whether the single parent family system is inherently dysfunctional for the rearing of children or the psychosocial behavior of the parent would appear to be answered in large part by the research of Aldous (1972) where he notes that no significant difference in perception of adult male and female where

between father parent and father absent children were noted.

Despite the evidence noted above which indicates that the single parent family is not inherently dysfunctional in any psychosocial sense, it should be noted, however, that this evidence is not to be interpreted as conclusive in the pragmatic sense as related to the single parent family system. At the more practical level there appears a myriad number of problems which either taken together or presented in certain sequence create enormous difficulties for the single parent family. Among these numerous difficulties, I would like to pick out three problems and treat them in some prospective. In the first case, the financial burden placed on the single parent is critical.

With the exception of the single parent widow or widower who may benefit from life insurance and perhaps social security, the single parent as a result of other circumstances is typically left with minimal resources. Lack of resources for anyone is more generally a critical problem. In the simple parent system, this is ever more so when placed on top of the other problems already identified.

The psychological stress placed upon the single parent is a further problem in that the lack of consistent adult psychological support often supplied by a partner is frequently missing. This phenomena becomes critical for the single parent faced with a crisis which is introduced from the environment at large.

A further problem related to the health of the single

parent family is presented by the fact that society tends to judge the effectiveness of the parent through the behavior of the child.

Kingsley Davis in a now classic paper written in 1940, "The Sociology of Parent-Youth Conflict," discussed eleven variables which he felt made the role of parent immensely difficult and, at the same time, places the parent at an unfair disadvantage when assessing their relative effectiveness on parents.[23] Essentially these phenomena, in relation to the difficulty of parenting, becomes more critical when one speaks of single parent families in that any deviation is assumed to be directly related to the fact that one is viewing a single parent and in many cases have implicitly assumed a lack in the family by definition.

Social Policy Implications

In a study recently completed which was based on 100 interviews with single parents in the Milwaukee Metropolitan area, the following problems surfaced as significant in the perception of the interviewees.[24] In order of priority, the single parents interviewed identified lack of time as a resource to be spent with children as a first problem. In the second place, many indicated lack of day care and/or evening care facilities as a further problem. In conjunction with the lack of day care was the monetary constraints placed on using a baby sitter, and in some instances, the monetary constraints presented by use of the local day care center where one existed.

Some further problems which were identified in a sizable portion of the group were lack of freedom to interact with other adults because of children's needs, the difficulty in obtaining credit ratings owing to marital status and dependents, the constraints on

schooling or training for the parent as a result of limited finances and/or time available and, consequently, the prospect of low level and frustrating work environments, and, finally, a feeling of loss of psychological space owing to the lack of other dependable adult support systems and the difficulty of being the sole adult in the child's or children's lives in terms of a responsible decision making capacity.

In essence, the general feeling expressed by most of the parents interviewed was that their children were doing well and developing normally, but the child's continual well being was contingent upon significant personal sacrifice for the parent, psychologically, socially, and materially.

Based on these findings, it would seem appropriate to at least conjecture that even in the most adaptive situations there still may exist subtle feelings of guilt, rejection, and stress on the part of the parent which it may be presumed is communicated no matter how subtley to the child and may in effect prove maladjustive.

Suggested Social Policy Measures

Given the fact that single parent families are a phenomenon which are on the increase with projection for 1980 of roughly 16 million,[25] we, as a society, must in fact entertain some realistic alternatives in response to such a phenomenon. In the first instance, it would seem of paramount importance that day care funding and facilities increase at a rate proportionate to the increase in such families, if not more so.

It would further seem assuming the projection for 1980, incumbent upon society to fund some large scale studies to determine more accurately the dimension of this problem and the impact which such a phenomenon will have on the society in future years. Relative to this same point, it would seem that the funding of studies to determine the points of stress and failure in the traditional family system be initiated in as much as divorce and separation are contributing in large part to the increase of single parent families.

The work structure of our society must be reviewed with the single parent family in mind. It makes little sense to speak of affirmative action programs when many are excluded from jobs owing to time and resource constraints placed by family situation. It may be more sensible to look at our institutions and come to grips with needed changes such as: 1) granting full tax deductions for housekeepers and day care expenses; the removal of the nepotism rule(to make it easier for husband and wives to relocate together); and perhaps the granting of Civil Service tenure for part time jobs. On top of these possible changes, it would seem necessary to formulate an organized way of dealing with single parent families in terms of parent education functions, groups for fostering single parent interection which may, in fact, lead to organized programs of day care, etc., and most certainly there is the need for legislation which would address the problem of finances, credit ratings, and general resources to alleviate the burdens placed on single parent families in the realm of monetary stress.

A further recommendation for policy decisions would seem appropriate in the area of crisis intervention. Given the stresses based on the single parent family at this time, there is most certainly a need for some organized system of crisis intervention to protect the children, parents, and society at large from the unfortunate consequences of temporary crisis situations encountered by all families at various times. For the single parent family, their crisis intervention system is most critical owing to the lack of social and psychological support suggested by the presence of other adults in the family situation.[26]

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